

Women in Combat Roles: Case Study of Female Engagement Teams

by

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WOMEN IN COMBAT ROLES: CASE STUDY OF FEMALE ENGAGEMENT TEAMS

by

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ABSTRACT

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WOMEN IN COMBAT ROLES: CASE STUDY OF FEMALE ENGAGEMENT TEAMS

The phrase, “Women in combat”: what does this mean to the American public? A reading of the Department of Defense (DOD) Combat Exclusion Policy, as it is written today, would have our citizens believe that women serving in the military are not exposed to direct ground combat operations. However, this cannot be further from the truth; today’s nonlinear battlefield does not allow for the distinction between direct ground combat and operations in support of combat. Military women serving in Afghanistan may be exposed to a combat situation at any time, and, in this reality, the DOD Combat Exclusion Policy hampers the military’s ability to fight an effective counterinsurgency campaign by limiting the assignment and collocation of women to units throughout the area of operations. One of the most current examples of the blurring between combat and combat support is the utilization of women to engage the Afghan population in support of counterinsurgency operations, most commonly referred to as “Female Engagement Teams,” or FET.

In an effort to address the current policies and environment under which women serve in the military, this paper examines the DOD Combat Exclusion Policy and the current initiatives aimed at changing the policy. It also discusses how the military is utilizing women on the battlefield in support of counterinsurgency operations and provides recommendations for how these initiatives can be institutionalized to maintain this new capability for use in future operations. While of interest to many people, this paper does not address the social aspects and concerns of women serving in combat.

DOD Combat Exclusion Policy Background

The United States government and military are addressing concerns regarding female military members serving in the designated combat zones of the past 10 years of conflict. Prior to initiation of ground hostilities in Iraq and Afghanistan after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack, the last time women served in a combat zone with their male peers on a large scale was during the first Gulf War, Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm in 1991. During that war, the 1988 DOD Combat Exclusion Policy came under scrutiny and was determined to be not applicable or enforceable. Referred to as the “Risk Rule,” that version of the DOD Combat Exclusion Policy “excluded women from non-combat units or missions if the risks of exposure to direct combat, hostile fire, or capture were equal to or greater than the risk in the combat units they supported.”¹ However, the experiences of those women who served in Desert Shield/Storm led DOD policymakers to conclude that all military personnel in the combat theater were at risk and thus a risk-based policy was no longer appropriate. Based on this assessment, the “Risk Rule” was rescinded on January 13, 1994, and replaced by a directive that addressed the specific assignment and collocation of female service members with direct combat units.² The U.S. Secretary of Defense Memorandum, “Direct Combat Definition and Assignment Rule” states the following:

Rule: Service members are eligible to be assigned to all positions which they are qualified, except that women shall be excluded from assignment to units below the brigade level whose primary mission is to engage in direct combat on the ground as defined below.

Definition: Direct ground combat is engaging an enemy on the ground with individual or crew served weapons, while being exposed to hostile fire and to a high probability of direct physical contact with hostile forces personnel. Direct ground combat takes place well forward on the battlefield while locating and closing with the enemy to defeat them by fire, maneuver or shock effect.³

Army Regulation 600-13, Army Policy for the Assignment of Female Soldiers, dated March 27, 1992, complies with the 1994 DOD Combat Exclusion Policy.

The Army's assignment policy for female soldiers allows women to serve in any officer or enlisted specialty or position except in those specialties, positions, or units (battalion size or smaller) which are assigned a routine mission to engage in direct combat, or which collocate routinely with units assigned a direct combat mission.⁴

While this policy did open thousands of positions previously closed to women, to include most aviation specialties, the DOD Combat Exclusion Policy failed to open direct offensive ground combat jobs. This shortcoming is the major reason it now faces the same challenge as its predecessor — it is a policy that does not reflect the current situation faced by female service members serving on the battlefield. In their article, “DOD’s Combat Exclusion Policies Limit Commanders and Strain Our Current Forces,” Traci Swanson and Sheila Medeiros summarize the current situation best. The authors state, “Because the modern battlefield is increasingly non-linear and fluid, these policies are nearly impossible to apply, particularly in the counterinsurgency environments that lack a well defined forward area.”⁵ The enemy does not differentiate between combat, combat support, and combat service support units. Clearly, military women share the risk with their male peers in modern warfare, regardless of location or assignment, because “the battlefield does not discriminate between genders.”⁶

In support of these observations, General Rupert Smith, author of *The Utility of Force*, also makes a strong argument that traditional war no longer exists. General Smith states “...war as a battle in a field between men and machinery, war as a massive deciding event in a dispute in international affairs: such a war no longer exists.”⁷ He acknowledges that confrontation, conflict, and combat does exist, but instead of large scale use of equipment as a machine of modern war organized in

formation, designed to do battle and attain a definitive result, war is now fought at all levels and it is almost impossible to distinguish the combatant from the noncombatant in counterinsurgency operations.⁸

If one accepts General Smith's assessment that war can no longer be separated from the people, it may be logical to assume that female service members independent of their unit of assignment can no longer remain separate from the fighting that goes on around them. Based on this reality, and in order for the military to both comply with the DOD Combat Exclusion Policy, as well as maintain efficiency and effectiveness, combatant commanders often apply two generous interpretations of the policy:

1) Military women are "attached" to the very units in which they are prohibited from assignment. The key difference between "attaching" versus "assigning" someone to a unit is the duration of the assignment. When a service member is "attached" it is considered for the most part a temporary placement in the organization versus "assigning" which is more permanent.⁹

2) Military women are placed in "operational control" status as part of the brigade level support to the base support battalion instead of assigning them to forward support companies and other companies that deploy and collocate with their supported battalions (that are assigned a direct combat mission). Yet in actual operations, the women were collocated or are embedded with combat maneuver battalions.¹⁰

Considering the DOD Combat Exclusion Policy as it is written, coupled with the realization that women are, indeed, serving in combat roles, one could ask: why hasn't the policy been changed? In 2007, the RAND Corporation conducted a study to determine if the Army was complying with its own regulations and DOD policies in

regards to military women utilization in Iraq. In its final report, RAND concluded that the Army was complying with its prohibition on assigning women to ground combat positions and units, but that the Army is in possible violation of its own collocation policy, depending on how it is interpreted. The report recommended that the DOD and the Army re-craft the policy or rescind it altogether based on current realities.¹¹

While these findings may have surprised Congress and policymakers, the apparent lack of public awareness did not drive them to make any changes to the policy. It is only in the past year that policymakers and politicians alike began pushing for an overhaul of the policy. Among many, one of the most common issues raised in the call for policy change is that the current policy hinders military women's ability to receive credit for their combat experience, and therefore be competitive in promotions with their male counterparts. As one example, most of the top jobs in the Army are held by general officers that came from the Combat Arms branches.

Congress, the DOD, and several other politicians are now leading the way to set the conditions for change. At the beginning of this fiscal year, Congress amended the Defense Authorization Act with an initiative that will have significant changes to the Combat Exclusion Policy.

In Section 535 of the Defense Authorization Act for FY 2011, P.L. 111-383 (signed January 7, 2011), Congress required the Secretary of Defense to conduct, in coordination with the Secretaries of the military departments, "a review of laws, policies and regulations, including the collocation policy, that may restrict the service of female members of the Armed Forces to determine whether changes in such laws, policies and regulations are needed to ensure that female members have an equitable opportunity to compete and excel in the Armed Forces," and "not later than April 15, 2011, [to] submit to the congressional defense committees a report containing results of the review."¹²

Along the same time frame, the Congressionally-established DOD Military Leadership Diversity Commission conducted a comprehensive evaluation and assessment of promotion and advancement policies that provide opportunities for minority members of the Armed Forces. The commission sought extensive input from the DOD, Services, and the private sector through interviews with service members, public hearings, meetings in locations across the country where many active-duty service members and veterans reside, public testimony from top military leaders, subject matter experts, and diversity officers from leading corporations. The commission made 20 recommendations that support two overarching and related objectives:

- 1) That the Armed Forces systematically develop a demographically diverse leadership that reflects the public it serves and the forces it leads.
- 2) That the Services pursue a broader approach to diversity that includes the range of backgrounds, skill sets, and personal attributes that are necessary to enhancing military performance.¹³

The findings were submitted to President Barack Obama on March 15, 2011 during the 112th United States Congress. Their finding specific to females in military service was that women were underrepresented among senior military officers. To address this they recommended:

DOD and the Services must remove institutional barriers in order to open traditionally closed doors, especially those related to assignments – both the initial career field assignment and subsequent assignments to key positions. *An important step in this direction is that DoD and the Services eliminate combat exclusion policies for women* [emphasis added], including removing barriers and inconsistencies, to create a level playing field for all service members who meet qualifications.¹⁴

The report's recommendation 9 applies specifically to female service members and includes a time-phased approach:

- a. Women in career fields/specialties currently open to them should be immediately able to be assigned to any unit that requires that career field/specialty, consistent with the current operational environment.
- b. DOD and the Services should take deliberate steps in a phased approach to open additional career fields and units involved in “direct ground combat” to qualified women.
- c. DOD and the Services should report to Congress the process and timeline for removing barriers that inhibit women from achieving senior leadership positions.¹⁵

Retired Air Force General Lester L. Lyles, Chairman of the Commission, stated, “If you look at today’s battlefield – in Iraq and Afghanistan – it’s not like it was in the Cold War, when we had a defined battlefield, women serve – and they lead.”¹⁶

Following the DOD Military Leadership Diversity Commission, Democratic Representative Loretta Sanchez, of California, introduced HR 1928, Women’s Fair and Equal Right to Military Service Act, to the House of Representatives on May 13, 2011, subsequently referred to the House Armed Services Committee and House Armed Services Subcommittee on Military Personnel on June 24, 2011. The purpose of the Act is to amend Title 10, United States Code, in order to repeal the Ground Combat Exclusion Policy for female members of the Armed Forces.

The act requires the Secretary of Defense to revise the military personnel policies of the Department of Defense and the military departments so that such policies do not restrict members of the Armed Forces from assignments to units and positions based on gender. Prohibits any change in a military personnel policy that would exclude based on gender.¹⁷

This Act is aimed at “allowing commanders in the field the flexibility to assign women to combat positions if they were qualified to accomplish the mission.”¹⁸

In addition, Democratic Representative Senator Robert Menendez, of New Jersey, and Genevieve Chase, Founder and Director of American Women Veterans, introduced efforts in the Senate “to update the DOD ‘combat exclusion’ policy so that

military women are afforded the training, recognition, and compensation they deserve for their work in ground combat operations.”¹⁹

Of most significance, on February 9, 2012, the DOD formally announced the plan to make two changes to the Combat Exclusion Policy. These changes will have far-reaching effects throughout the military.

In a report required by the 2011 National Defense Authorization Act, the department notified Congress today it intends to make two changes to rules in place since 1994 governing the service of female members of the armed forces: first, occupations will no longer be closed to women solely because the positions are required to be co-located with ground combat units; and second, a sizable number of positions will be opened to women at the battalion level in select direct ground combat units in specific occupations.²⁰

If lawmakers take no action, changes to the policy will take effect after 30 days of continuous session of Congress. In early spring, military leaders for the most part will be allowed to utilize female service members in support of combat operations based on their skills and qualifications regardless of their gender. Specifically, removal of the collocation exclusion will result in the opening of 14,325 additional positions to women. Of note, this policy will not affect the Army’s current prohibition of assigning women to combat military occupational specialty codes such as Infantry, Armor, and the Special Forces.

These recent actions initiated by the DOD, Congress, the DOD Military Leadership Diversity Commission, and members of Congress are clear indicators that there is perceived support from the American public to provide female service members fair consideration and opportunity in the military regardless of the type of operations they support. However, one example of an in-practice utilization of women that remains vulnerable to strict interpretation of the DOD Combat Exclusion Policy is the

employment of female service members to support counterinsurgency (COIN) operations.

Case Study- Female Engagement Teams

Female service members serve as an instrument in support of full spectrum COIN operations by enhancing access to civilian women amongst the population and thereby enabling ground forces to conduct operations necessary to defeat the enemy.²¹ Military women support COIN operations as additional members of the all male teams. While performing engagement missions, women run the risk, alongside their male counterparts, of being exposed to direct ground combat.

COIN focuses on destabilizing/defeating insurgents and creating a secure environment that supports government rule. Although COIN is often referred to as “winning the hearts and minds of the people,” a more accurate assessment of the true capabilities of an effective COIN strategy comes from an unidentified colonel who appeared on the Cable News Network. During his interview he stated:

We cannot really win the hearts and minds of the Iraqis but we can provide security and establish trust. In security lies the support of the majority and the environment in which a new and better state may emerge.²²

This statement captures the core idea of COIN, which is struggle for the population’s support. In Iraq and Afghanistan, cultural taboos and strict separation of men and women within society kept the military from interacting with approximately half the population. Sahana Dharmapur, in her article “Just Add Women and Stir?” explains how females can be utilized in addressing this restriction. She states that “female soldiers and police have access to a greater range of actors in conservative societies because they can meet with all members of society, unlike their male counterparts.”²³

David Kilcullen also addresses this shortfall in his paper, "Twenty-Eight Articles Fundamental of Company-level Counterinsurgency":

Engage the Women- Most insurgent fighters are men. But in traditional societies, women are hugely influential in forming the social networks that insurgents use for support. Co-opting neutral or friendly women, through targeted social and economic programs, builds networks of enlightened self-interest that eventually undermines the insurgents...Win the women, and you own the family unit. Own the family unit, and you take a big step forward in mobilizing the population.²⁴

Realizing the importance of engaging the female population, the military began utilizing females in operations expecting contact with Iraqi and Afghan women. In 2003, commanders utilized female service members initially for searching Iraqi women at checkpoints for weapons or "attached to all-male combat units with the mission of defusing tensions with Iraqi women and children as part of an ad hoc Army program called Team Lioness."²⁵ The Marines also developed two programs in Iraq to interact with the female population, the Lioness Program and the Iraqi Women's Engagement Program (IWE).

Lioness was mainly a search effort at entry control points and was used for some "knock and greets", but had little to no follow through after initial contact with women. IWE was aimed at identifying sources of instability from the women, connecting the women together, and then coordinating with local government, civil affairs personnel, nongovernment organizations, and provincial reconstruction teams to facilitate the reduction of those instabilities.²⁶

As these early practices and programs did not have a formal structure, each unit or command constructed and utilized the teams as they saw fit. They were seen as an innovative approach to engaging the female population in Iraq, but their effectiveness was not assessed and their utilization was not institutionalized. Based on the positive results of these engagement teams in Iraq, the concept found support for utilization in Afghanistan as well. In 2009, the Marines took the lead in formalizing these teams and

coined the phrase “Female Engagement Team” (FET). Still ad-hoc, the teams consisted of female volunteers serving on the forward operating bases. FET members held full-time jobs with their assigned units based on their military skills and training. When needed, they had to be released from their usual duties to go on FET missions.

The Marines documented the utilization of the FETs and found that many local Afghans accepted the FET presence. Apparently, both male and female Afghans saw the American military women as sort of a “third gender,” therefore rules of behavior and dress for Afghan women did not apply to the American women. In recognition of this “third gender,” Afghans extended to female Marines the respect shown to men, but granted access normally reserved for women.²⁷

Marine First Lieutenant Matt Pottinger, a Coalition Joint Intelligence Liaison Officer, assessed some of the first FETs in 2009. His after action reviews laid the groundwork in validating the Marine Corps’ support for the initiative. With the formalization of the FETs, an officer was appointed to manage the program and a training plan was developed.

First Lieutenant Pottinger found FETs were best utilized in the “hold” phase of COIN “clear-hold-build operations”.²⁸ In accordance with military doctrine, the “hold” phase aims to develop a long-term, effective Host Nation government framework and presence in the area, which secures the people and facilitates by meeting their basic needs, and provides legitimate governance.²⁹ Captain Cathy Cappetta, the FET officer in charge for the 86th Infantry Basic Combat Team (Mountain), Task Force Wolverine, in Bagram, Afghanistan, likened this type of tactic to her job as a Vermont State Trooper. In that role, she would make first contact with the victim and may even follow-up, but in

order to have long-term effectiveness, she must work with the regional agencies that are able to provide support over an extended period of time. Captain Cappetta stated,

I can go to a domestic violence situation and immediately help the victim by making an arrest, giving her (or him) resources to call such as a safe house or counseling. However, as a State Trooper (who patrols an entire county with over 21 towns), I may never see that victim again. Unless I make a concerted effort to follow-up with that victim, I may never know the outcome (Did their life get better? Did they get out of the bad situation? Are they going to continue to be a victim?). And, as much as I wish I could do this follow-up with every case, the size of my coverage area, population, and call volume will never allow me to know of the effectiveness I had on a situation. Essentially, it becomes the responsibility of the other agency's (the counseling service, DCF, etc) to conduct this follow-up, and sometimes they even lose track. (Yes, I am relating "other agencies" to civilian agencies in Afghanistan, i.e. USAID, etc.).³⁰

Utilizing FETs in a semi-permissive environment where they can access families in their homes on a repeating basis encourages the development of relationships through the establishment of trust and confidence. FETs can also soften or de-escalate local perceptions of clearing operations. Introducing FET members in *shuras* and meetings with local leaders let them know that the coalition forces had the means to conduct searches in a culturally respectful manner, and that the female Marines were there to identify the needs of the female population. In searches of women and rooms holding women and children, FETs were invited into compounds, providing further opportunities to engage.³¹

In May 2010, an International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) FET directive provided guidance for standardizing female engagements with Afghan women by ISAF units. In July 2010, the Marine Corps led the way by formalizing a pre-deployment training program conducted in the United States to meet the tenets of the ISAF FET directive. Marine Forces Central Command prepared a fragmentary order (FRAGO) in

August 2010, outlining how female service members performing FET missions could provide essential support of combat operations in accordance with the Combat Exclusion Policy.

The FRAGO clarified the restriction of female assignments to combat units expected to maneuver with direct ground combat units with a generous interpretation of the existing policy, by specifically stating, “if females were moved with combat units that do not envision offensive fires then the movements do not constitute maneuver and do not violate the exclusion policy.”³² The FRAGO did not preclude females from performing other noncombat tasks such as accompanying a combat unit on local engagement missions.

The Army followed the Marine Corps’ lead by establishing FETs as viable tools to gain greater acceptance from the local population and collect information the units could use to enhance operations and provide improved security in their area of operations. Starting in July 2010, units deployed to Afghanistan conducted some level of in-theater FET training and performed FET operations. In March 2011, ISAF directed that all brigade combat teams deploying to Afghanistan after August 2011 have trained FETs assigned to the unit prior to deployment.³³ Both the Marine Corps and Army programs support the FET purpose of “conducting engagements with the Afghan population in a culturally respectful manner that facilitates building confidence with the Afghan people.”³⁴

Formalization of Female Engagement Team Training Programs

The success of the female engagement teams in Afghanistan led the Army and Marine Corps to institutionalize the concept of FETs through the development of standardized training programs. Currently, the Marine Corps has a standardized four

month training program that concentrates on kinetic (70%) and classroom instruction (30%) to provide the essential skills required for the female Marines in support of a FET. The kinetic training consists of infantry tactics, tactical site exploration, combat tracking, night/day marksmanship, physical training, martial arts, and other skills necessary for survival in a war zone. The classroom instruction concentrates on cultural training, language skills, and role playing scenarios.³⁵ Although the Marine program is currently the most extensive training program, one critique of the program by Marine Master Sergeant Julia Watson, author of the article “Female Engagement Teams,” is that the course ignores key elements of civil affairs training that would prepare the FETs in how to properly engage the Afghan women in civil military operations. Her argument is that the FETs are unprepared to know what to ask local women, what to do with the information in the larger picture of stability operations or how to write a report which could be used for non-kinetic targeting and planning purposes.³⁶ Therefore, Master Sergeant Watson recommended adding civil affairs training to the program curriculum.

The Army addresses FET training through multiple channels to facilitate the ability of deploying units to meet the new requirements. In 2011, the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command created a series of on-line training support packages (TSP) available for pre-deployment FET training use specific to Afghanistan. The on-line TSP consists of 23 lessons divided into six modules and is intended for presentation over a nine day period. The program draws from existing curricula and includes some lessons developed specifically to address the unique role and purpose the U.S. Army envisions for FETs.³⁷ A critique of the TSP is that the course is designed to enhance a female’s cultural awareness for engaging the female population in Afghanistan and as such, it

does not provide any training for possible kinetic engagements the FET may be exposed to during their missions. Units utilizing this TSP can enhance the training by adding a segment on basic combat skills to the training plan.

The Combined Joint Task Force-101, assigned to the Regional Command-East Afghanistan, mandates additional training for FET members, consisting of a five day (40 hours) course upon arrival in theater.³⁸ This additional training enhances the training received prior to the deployment and allows for region-specific best practices and lessons learned presentations.

The Army Special Operations Command created a more in-depth training program to address the shortfall in FET-like trained female soldiers available to support their special operations missions. The Cultural Support Program is an eight week training program that consists of a two week assessment and selection period and six weeks of training and qualification. Upon graduation from the course, the students are awarded a project development skill identifier (PDSI) and the title “cultural support specialist”. Cultural support specialists serve up to eight months overseas, attached (not assigned) to an Army special operations unit in support of contingency operations. A cultural support specialist differs from a traditional FET member because she is specifically assessed, selected, trained, and educated to support ARSOF-unique missions.

The Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL) developed the *Commander's Guide to Female Engagement Teams* as the basic resource document that ties all the Army training initiatives together. CALL continually updates the guide to reflect the current “best practices” and “lessons learned”. It is an excellent resource for unit

commanders developing and managing their own FET program. The guide was developed from multiple sources including: Marine Corps after-action reports prepared for the initial assessment of the effectiveness of their FETs, information from the Army Special Operations Command Cultural Support Program, FET members, FET trainers, and cultural support/civil affairs experiences. The guide contains a section on FET lessons learned, best practices and provides FET reporting formats. The guide also outlines a FET four week training course that can enhance the FET TSP. The training consists of combat skills familiarization, counterinsurgency fundamentals, engagement and culture, and culmination training events. The extensive training tools available support the commander's ability to effectively utilize women in the engagement arena.

In recognition of this new and unique skill, the Headquarters, Department of the Army, G1, established a PDSI in July 2011. The new skill identifier, "G3F," is awarded to female officers, warrant officers, and enlisted Soldiers in any area of concentration / military occupational specialty who have successfully completed the FET training support package developed by U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command. The creation of this PDSI allows females to document the training in their official military records.³⁹ The PDSI will assist in tracking individuals qualified as a FET member for future assignments.

Assessing the Effectiveness of Female Engagement Teams

While the military is taking the necessary steps to institutionalize the FETs through standardized training and the establishment of a PDSI, it is imperative that the impact on the Afghan people be assessed to determine the effectiveness of the teams. Dr. LisaRe Brooks, a social scientist with the Army's Human Terrain Systems (HTS),

succinctly identified the desired results in an ISAF HTS brief in October 2010, where she stated:

Female engagements are an integral component of COIN by embracing and understanding the missing 50 percent of the population;... The desired end states are four fold: (1) For women to influence families/communities not to support the Taliban; (2) For women to influence other women to demand basic services from the local government with coalition force support; (3) For women to influence family and community members to support the GIRoA; and (4) For women not to support/enable insurgency.⁴⁰

The desire by other nations to adapt and utilize the FET model should be seen as an additional indicator of the success of the FETs. The British military forces serving in Afghanistan are creating their own FETs and Afghan National Policewomen have expressed a desire to partner with U.S. military FETs to learn how to employ FETs within their own organization.

The first two British female soldiers completed the Marine Corps' FET course in the Helmand province in May 2010. The soldiers formed the first British FET for the infantry rifle company of the Royal Regiment of Scotland.⁴¹ In Lashkar Gah, British FETs were set up during Operation HERRICK 13 to help Afghan women into work. The FETs partner with Stabilization Advisers and Military Stabilization Support Teams to develop co-operatives and workshops where women can use traditional skills to produce goods for sale and develop a market for what they produce.⁴²

In a meeting with female members of the Afghan National Police (ANP) in Lashkar Gah, Marine FET members talked about their mission and engagements with the Pashtun women, several members of the police force expressed their desire to conduct similar work. Through their engagements, the female police have opportunities to improve the image of the ANP.⁴³

The strongest indicator of achievements through the utilization of FETs comes from comments made by the local populace in their support and acceptance of FETs in their villages. Afghan men enjoy an opportunity to meet with FETs and this has proven to be an effective engagement strategy for FET missions. “Afghan males interact differently with female Soldiers than they do with male Soldiers. They provide different insights in regard to what they see happening around them in the local community. Many males feel comfortable speaking with female Soldiers.”⁴⁴ One comment by a male elder in an Afghan village summed up their belief in the FET engagements this way: “Your men come to fight, but we know the women are here to help.”⁴⁵

Common Considerations for the Effective Utilization of FETs

Based on research conducted in writing this paper, the following guidelines outline conditions necessary for effective utilization of FETs in engaging the Afghan population:

1) Commanders must understand the purpose of the FET. They should provide directives and guidance on how the FETs will fit into the organization’s plans and operations.⁴⁶ Captain Jennifer Montgomery, the FET officer-in-charge for the 172d Support Battalion, described her challenges with gaining support from her command in the training and utilization of the FET. She stated:

I think the hardest fight with implementing FET in a unit is the buy in from commanders. Without support from the units and strong leadership, it is extremely difficult to work the FET into the team. We had a problem during training with infantry platoon leaders leaving the FET behind because they would react to contact, execute their tactics, techniques and procedures (which we didn't know...) and end up leaving us behind.⁴⁷

2) Staff planners must understand how to properly nest and synchronize FET efforts into a commander’s plan or a partnering agency’s efforts in gender operations.⁴⁸

3) FETs leaders must be involved in the planning stage of operations to address concerns about mission scope, duration, and effectiveness.⁴⁹

4) FET members must be full-time to allow for enhancing team cohesion and building solid relationships with the Afghan people.

5) FETs need to build trusted relationships to yield information of critical importance.⁵⁰ Therefore, they must conduct persistent and consistent engagements with the local populace.⁵¹

6) Commanders must ensure FETs have the ability and resources to address problems/issues raised during engagements with the local populace.

7) FET visits must be coupled with tangible benefits to the community and efforts to improve lives of locals in terms of security and civil affairs projects.⁵²

8) Short term initiatives for outreach, assistance, and providing supplies must be coordinated with organizations that bring the capacity for long-term sustainability. Key leaders in the community must support the projects for their effectiveness.⁵³

9) FET members must have cultural training. Poor understanding of the local culture, social taboos, and politics/hierarchy within the village can not only hinder the engagement, but have a negative impact that will keep the team from any further meetings within the village. Captain Cappetta compared her FET experience to her job as a State Trooper in rural America. She states:

In Vermont, we are the main policing agency in the rural areas. We take all types of calls from crashes, to burglaries, to domestics. The use of FETs are very similar. There is no one right way to employ FETs for the entire country of Afghanistan. FETs have to be flexible according to the Area of Operations they are operating in. The cultural training has to stress this.⁵⁴

10) FET members should be selected based on their assessed ability to perform the mission. The Special Operations Command assessment process for their Cultural Support Program is a good model to follow. Components of the assessment should include: maturity, leadership, basic tactical skills (e.g. patrolling, land navigation, developing an operation order, react to enemy contact...), physical fitness, and weapons qualification. Captain Montgomery's experience in Afghanistan reinforces this recommendation. She stated:

Many females in my experience are not strong tactical leaders and are unconfident in their abilities -- more training is required to get them in the mindset to accomplish the FET mission alongside their male counterparts. This is outside of the challenge of building physical fitness for the group to be able to carry the load on a long patrol.⁵⁵

Any formalized FET or FET-like program should ensure the common considerations listed above are used in forming the core framework to allow for the effective utilization of these capabilities in future operations.

The Future of Female Engagement Teams

With the end of the war in Iraq and planned transition to a stabilized Afghanistan capable of self-government by 2014, the question must be raised as to what will be done to maintain the FET capability within the Army and Marine Corps. The successful utilization of FETs in Afghanistan and the United States 2012 Strategic Priorities places a strong focus on the Middle East and supports the FET program institutionalization. FETs and FET-like capabilities will play a key role in future combat, peace enforcing, and peace keeping operations in this region of the world. Sahana Dharmapuri, author of the article, "Just Add Women and Stir?" highlights the benefits of utilizing women in support of gender awareness. She states:

Adding a gender perspective in peace and security operations illuminates the different threats and opportunities for men and women's security. Gender awareness improves situational awareness because it provides a sociocultural lens on power relationships, including race, class, poverty level, ethnicity, and age. In the context of peace and security operations, gender awareness identifies the different priorities and abilities of men and women to advance peace and reconstruction efforts.⁵⁶

Evidence shows that the inclusion of women enhances operational effectiveness in three key ways: improved information gathering, enhanced credibility, and better force protection.⁵⁷

One of the most likely career fields for maintaining and managing the integration of the FET capability is in Civil Affairs (CA). CA units help military commanders by working with civil authorities and civilian populations in the commander's area of operations to lessen the impact of military operations on the population during peace, contingency operations, and declared war. The argument in support of moving FETs to CA is that females are part of the population that CA seeks in performing their mission; so there is no need to create a separate organization for the FET capability.

CA could provide the doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership and education, personnel, and facilities (DOTMLPF) necessary for the formal institutionalization of the FETs in the CA proponentcy. In addition, both the Marine Corps and Army have CA military skill fields and units. Air Force and Navy CA personnel reside in the Reserve CA. Therefore, the placement of FET capability in the CA arena of both services will enhance standardization across the Department of Defense.

If the FET capability is placed inside the CA proponentcy, the following should be taken into consideration:

- 1) Increase female authorizations/billets to maintain a capability to support FET requirements by providing for rotational and training depth.

2) Add tactical training to the FET TSP to increase their capabilities and better prepare them for operations in a combat environment. Tactical training should include portions of the basic combat training program of instruction received by the Infantry Military Occupation Specialty.

3) Establish a selection and evaluative retention process to ensure FET members have the necessary pre-requisite skills required for this physically demanding job as well as maintain them.

4) Maintain the PDSI to allow CA to indentify FET trained personnel that may be utilized to support surge requirements.

5) Ensure FET members receive equal pay entitlements as their male peers while in conduct of their duties and assignments to FETs.

While the institutionalization of FETs with the CA proponency will ensure FET or FET-like capabilities are retained by the military for employment in future contingencies, it does not address the required changes to the DOD Combat Exclusion Policy. Even the most recently proposed changes to the DOD Combat Exclusion Policy do not directly address the fact that FETs are utilized at the company level in COIN operations and so are still constrained by the policy without continued generous interpretation. The recent significant changes to the policy should not cause Congress, the DOD, politicians, and the public to lose sight of the fact that as long as the policy remains as written, it still limits the employment of women on the battlefield and is vulnerable to more strict interpretation in the future.

Today, women serving in the military are capable of performing their jobs no matter the location, in garrison or combat. Our military leadership understands this and

so will use the means necessary to accomplish the mission in a manner that respects the populations as well as the nation it serves. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the American public to continue their quest in seeking equal access that allows our citizens to serve throughout the military regardless of their gender.

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